Ashish Bagchi
An Artist for Children

R.K. MURTHI

Recognition has come to Ashish Bagchi, in the form of the UNICEF EZRA KEATS INTERNATIONAL AWARD for excellence in children's book illustrations for his illustrations of the book, *The Yellow Butterfly*, written by Nilima Sinha and published by the Children's Book Trust as highly creative and worthy of commendation. The Award has lifted Bagchi from anonymity. Today, he stands out as one of the young, promising illustrators of India. He is only 27. So age is in his favour. And one expects him, in the years to come, to scale further heights and gain more distinctions.

Here are extracts from an exclusive interview with this young achiever:

Q: You have become a celebrity of sorts with the announcement of the Award. How do you feel about it?

A: Happy, of course. Delighted, beyond doubt.

Q: How did you get the assignment for illustrating the manuscript *The Yellow Butterfly*?

A: This is the first book for children that I illustrated. I joined the Children's Book Trust as an illustrator about three years back. I had already been illustrating for the magazine Children's World, published by the *Children's Book Trust*. I also did free-lancing with art works in fields other than children's literature. But, once I became a member of the Children's Book Trust, I began to take my role as an illustrator for this genre of literature as my field of action.

I was given a choice of three manuscripts. I could choose any one for illustration.

Q: And you chose *The Yellow Butterfly*?

A: Yes.

Q: What made you choose the manuscript?

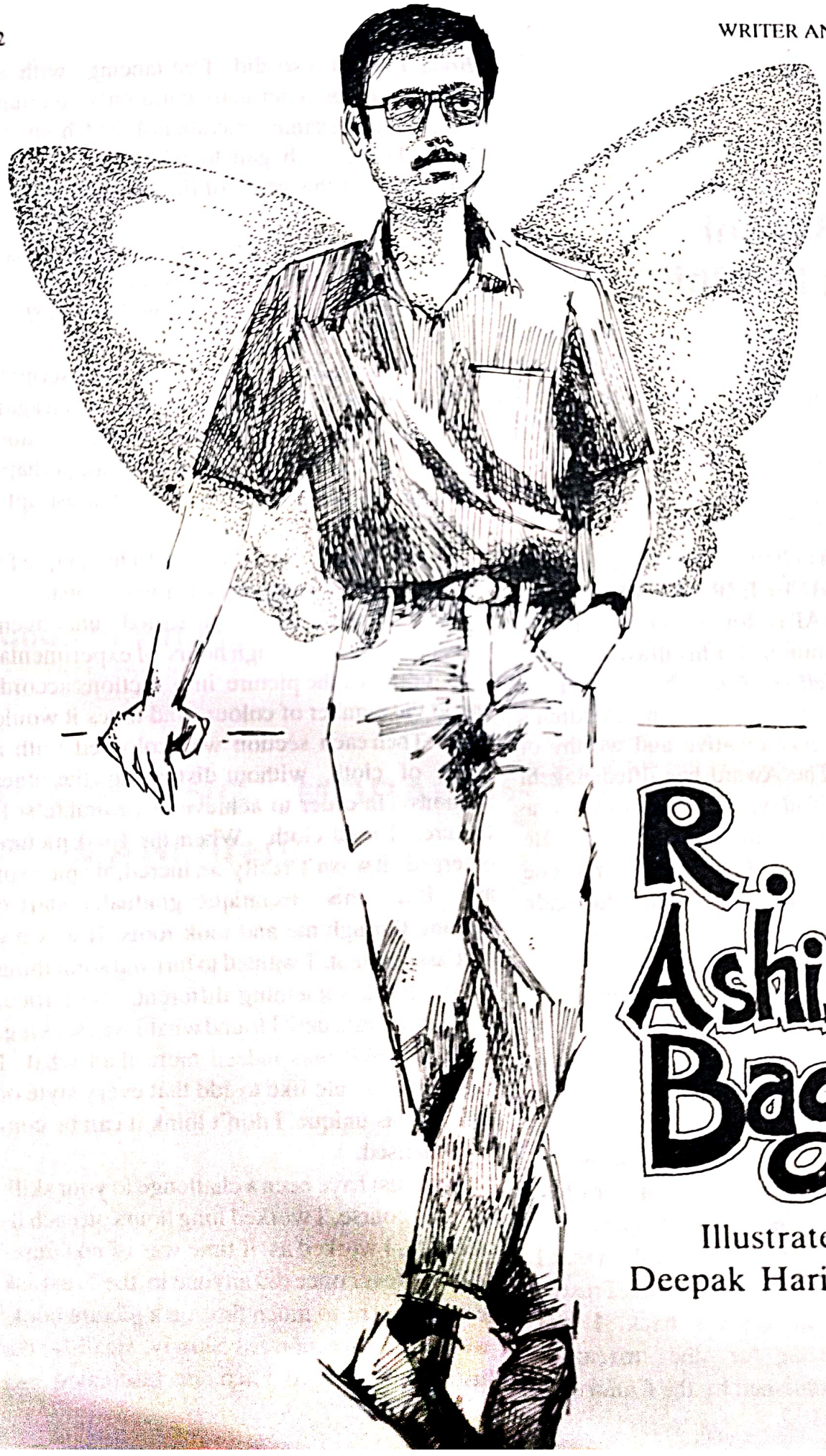
A: I found the story fascinating. I read it again and again. The story provided enough outdoor scenes, which I could illustrate. That, perhaps, tilted my decision in favour of the manuscript. I think I made the right choice.

Q: It is stated that you adopted a technique for the illustrations which is not conventional.

A: I stumbled on the so called 'unconventional technique' through hours of experimentation. I divided the picture into sections according to the number of colours and tones it would have. Then each section was coloured with a piece of cloth, without disturbing the other sections. In order to achieve a desirable soft texture, I used cloth. When the final picture emerged, it wasn't really an incredible piece of art. But, this technique gradually started seeping through me and took roots. It was my first assignment. I wanted to turn out something really good, something different. So I tried, again and again, until I found what I was seeking. The end result was indeed more than what I expected. I would like to add that every style or technique is unique. I don't think it can be conventionalised.

Q: It must have been a challenge to your skill.

A: Of course. I worked long hours on each illustration. I worked as if time was of no consequence. Never once did anyone in the Trust ask me why I spent so much time on a picture book. I worked for six months! Slowly, steadily, the illustrations emerged. Each one fascinated me.



Rishi Bagchi

Illustrated by
Deepak Harichandan

I became one with the scenes I chose to illustrate. The scenes could be conceived in the mind quickly. Yet, it was backbreaking work to get the mental pictures reproduced on paper.

Q: Why did you choose this rather tedious process?

A: I wanted to dare and produce something that would be different from the usual style.

Q: Now the daring has brought you international recognition.

A: I least expected it. The news of the Award came as a surprise. But, with it came a new realisation. If it brought me recognition, it also imposed on me a new responsibility. I know that in the years to come, I have to prove that this Award is not a flash in the pan. I still have a long way to go. But, I admit life has started off on the right note.

Q: Where did you get the necessary training for the profession of an artist?

A: I applied for admission to the Delhi College of Arts. The admission test was oriented to identify the talent of the candidates. I had no problem in the test. For drawing comes to me naturally. At the College, I gained the necessary exposure, the requisite guidance and the confidence that I had found my vocation.

Q: When did you decide you would take to illustrating for children?

A: Initially, there was no such clear choice. While still a student at the College of Arts, I took up some work in my spare time. I worked for commercial organisations. I was introduced to Mr Ramakrishnan, then Editor of Children's World. He gave me some assignments, carried my illustrations in the magazine. Later, when I graduated from the institution, came the chance to join the Children's Book Trust. Here, I found much needed opportunity to interact with professionals who had proved their mettle in the field.

My senior colleagues at the Trust made it easy for me to adjust to the settings. They examined my work, gave me many tips. Their suggestions were useful, based on their vast experience. They were careful with their suggestions. They left it to me whether to accept the suggestions or not.

Q: In other words, they wanted your individuality to enjoy full freedom to grow?

A: Yes. I still have a long way to go. I want to retain my individuality. I shall always be receptive to genuine, constructive criticism. Only then can I shed any inhibitions which may still be lurking within me. And only then can I find full expression for my creativity.

Q: What does this Award bring to you?

A: Firstly, it brings to me the feeling that I have the skill to make good in this field. I shall be spending a few days abroad from September 1993. I hope to learn the latest techniques from illustrators of other countries, interact with them, improve my knowledge, expand the vistas of my artistic vision.

Q: Which is the book you are illustrating, now?

A: I am currently illustrating a book by Rupa Gupta. It is titled, *Where has the Forest Gone?*

Q: Are you using the same technique?

A: No. The illustrations for this manuscript shall be in black and white.

Q: Do you think you should stick to this field?

A: I think so. I enjoy my work here. Here I work with texts written for children. I shall help the cause of promoting a taste for good literature among children. So, I consider myself lucky.

Q: May Dame Luck be always with you.

A: Thank you. I need encouragement. I am glad I received the Award. But, I know I still have to mature into a more competent artist. I hope to bring variety into my work. I hope to try experiments, develop innovative methods. These are my dreams.

Q: May your dreams come true.